DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 401 573 CS 215 582

AUTHOR Lipman, Joel
TITLE Beginning at the Beginning: The Alphabet's Origins as the Foundation for Interdisciplinary Writing Instruction.
PUB DATE Oct 96
NOTE 9p.; Paper presented at the Annual Conference on Liberal Arts and Education of Artists (10th, New York, NY, October 16-18, 1996).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Viewpoints (Opinion/Position Papers, Essays, etc.) (120)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Alphabets; Higher Education; *Interdisciplinary Approach; Writing Instruction; *Written Language
IDENTIFIERS Alphabetic Writing; Bauhaus; *Language Evolution; *Typeface; Typography; Visual Communication

ABSTRACT

The origins of written language and the study of the alphabet's evolution from pictographic icon or glyph to phonetic, syllabic code are fundamental to the study of writing. Electronically-generated typographies have reawakened interest in letterforms, alphabets, typefaces, and the physical arrangement of words on the page. Fonts, a word that languished within the typographer's specific lexicon during centuries of cold type, has emerged as a term of the desktopper's common parlance, and a click of a mouse chooses or manipulates a typeface. The development of alphabets form their iconographic and ideographic, presyllabic, embryonic origins through fanciful display types of the 19th century provided a foundation for an interdisciplinary (Art/English) course in Visual Language. The curricular model of the Bauhaus school of art and design shapes an instructor's ideas of presenting the course that covered both the basic origins and increasingly complex interrelationships of visual language. The fusion of craft, art, and technology that resounds through the philosophy and design achievements of the Bauhaus is achieved in the composition and text of Paul Klee's "Pedagogical Sketchbook." The stages of writing--from iconography to ideographic to analytic to phonetic--comprise the graphic story fundamental to usefully understanding the reflective strokes of written language. (Contains eight notes.) (RS)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED 401 573

BEGINNING AT THE BEGINNING: THE ALPHABET'S ORIGINS AS THE FOUNDATION FOR INTERDISCIPLINARY WRITING INSTRUCTION

Joel Lipman (Professor of English, University of Toledo)

-I-

In today's writing classroom (I nearly wrote class rom), the instructor occupies the front desk at a technologically intrepid moment--this is the case regardless of whether instruction is in composition, creative writing, business or scientific writing, or any writing-intesive and discipline-specific field. To teach writing without curricular attention to desktop technologies strikes many teachers as backwards and impractical, off-the-mark and irrelevant.

And yet how did writing arrive here and should not college graduates incorporate the history of writing's origins and development into their knowledge and usage? What impact does the study of pre- and historical patterns have on the manner by which one fundamentally understands and subsequently applies, codes, arranges, uses and crafts writing? Such questions as these underscore this paper's discussion and direct its concerns. For example: the WEB page is a planetary cultural given. What writerly knowledge nurtures and inspires the imagination about to embark upon composing such an electronically generated text? A sense of typography--its consistent concern with proportion, balance, readability, variety and uniformity, display and ornament--is basic, as is the vocabulary of type, as are the underlying potentialities of the page as a surface upon which one composes. Paradoxically, it is the electronic textual opportunity and its implicit avoidance of paper that necessitates a reconsideration of the history of basic letterforms and the page. Once again, the page is a blank canvas and the weights, measures, colors, arrangements and vital relationships between illustration and text are opportunistically present.

At this iconically prescient moment, the origins of written language and the study of the alphabet's evolution from pictographic icon or glyph to phonetic, syllabic code are fundamental to the study of writing. Primitive and scribal beginnings are rarely systematically included in the broader study of writing. It is not uncommon to read the brochures of notable writing programs and discover these curious absences.

CS215582

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE AND DISSEMINATE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

J. Lipman

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

☑ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Writing's beginnings are teasingly fablistic and mythic, concerned with structures, tools, affinities and relationships that remain active and purposeful. This vivid history is eloquently accessible and chartable; it fascinates students and comprises a graphic primer essential to usefully appreciating the reflexive strokes of writing and the relationships of letters.

II

Electronically-generated typographies have reawakened interest in letterforms, alphabets, typefaces and the physical arrangement of words on the page. Fresh language-graphics proliferate and visual language extends from every computer-user's fingertips. Students, visual artists, poets, book designers and page composers, advertising and commercial layout artists, Internet users, writers, academics--the catalogue of persons innovatingly addressing letterforms and the word proliferates.

Fonts, a word which languished within the typographer's specific lexicon during centuries of cold type, has emerged as a term of the desktopper's common parlance, and at the click of a mouse one chooses or manipulates a typeface. Writing in the March 1995 issue of *Metropolis: The Magazine of Architecture and Design*, Veronique Vienne cogently comments "The page is now a living surface. Fluidity is the order of the day. Your typical type foundry is a converted space--an office, loft, or bedroom--with a couple of Macs in the corner."1. Readers of this paper are well-aware of the epochal transition occuring in the world of letterforms, alphabets, and the overall design and presentation of the page. Even the term composition, so basic to the fundamentals of language instruction, assumes challenging, new proportions as teachers and students adapt to the potential of presenting texts in the age of proliferating software. The opportunistic idea of the page has quickly evolved into a spatial tableau upon which one innovatively arranges an array of letters, textures, lines and fields of color. This is a particularly liberating (some would say "democratizing") moment, one actively linking previously distinctive disciplines. Let me offer a few examples.

Rebeca Mendez, design director of the Art Center College of Design in Pasadena, California, "wants to use typography to re-script cultural assumptions about the best way to communicate" and composes employing type peppered with "imperceptible tricks...slight corruption of the letterforms, and strategically placed *mistakes*." She fashions a visual text which is irregular, suggesting "exquisitely flawed material."2.

Margo Johnson, a graduate of the California Institute of the Arts in Valencia, applies mathematical variables to existing typefaces and has developed "60 expressive hybrid fonts that retrace, backward, the story of the evolution of typography, from elegant cursives to primitive ink-spots." Says Johnson, "there is a trend in the multimedia field to turn type into pictures...I used to think of myself as a type designer--now I tell people I am an illustrator."3.

"Typefaces are not intrinsically legible," argues Zuzana Licko, who goes on to claim that "the reader's familiarity with the faces...accounts for their legibility." She observes that "it seems curious that Gothic letters, which we generally find illegible today, were actually preferred during the Middle Ages." Licko's Totally Gothic, a "medieval" typeface she designed in 1990, was first considered "hard to read when introduced to the market." Now it's used regularly, in small sizes, and it appears "the extra time people spend deciphering the words seems well worth the gratification they derive from the exercise."4.

Printers, bibliophiles, commercial artists, concrete poets and many others have historically sung of the romance of type. Today, however, the catalogue of persons enchanted by and exploring the forms and objective substance of letters and alphabets is expansively open-ended. Its relevance to the language-focused classroom is unmistakable.

-III-

This paper's origins reside in the development of an interdisciplinary (Art/English) course in Visual Language. I was researching the origins of writing and, as well, rummaging about for worthy examples and instances of exorbitantly visual language. My experience as a poet and teacher of creative writing provided certain touchstones--concrete poetry, independent presswork, broadside printing and mail art were areas of personal artistic practice. Other examples of visual language upon which I drew as I fashioned a syllabus included cartography, monuments and inscription, personal correspondence, collage, illuminated manuscripts, illustrated and artist's books, artist's sketchbooks, calligraphy, card games, cyphers and cryptic puzzles, book jackets, surrealist and dada texts and posters. But it was the development of alphabets from their iconographic and ideographic, presyllabic, embryonic origins through the fanciful display types of the 19th Century which provided the authentic, culturally-shared foundation for the course. I decided to conclude the Quarter's course with the revolutionary commencement of the age of electronic, computerized typography.

Paul Klee's **Pedagogical Sketchbook**, with its speculative, illustrated discussions of point and line, provided an intriguing, free-hand text I believed would interest both Art and English majors. Initially, I didn't realize how dramatically the Bauhaus curricular model would shape my ideas of presenting a course covering both the basic origins and increasingly complex interrelationships of visual language. The Bauhaus emphasis upon root knowledge of primary materials, the stress placed upon fundamentals of craft integrated with the subjectivity of art, its insistence upon the necessity of free experimentation prior to practical or theoretical concerns, all impressed me as creatively advantageous and naturally systematic.

The Bauhaus flourished as an innovative German school of art and design from 1919 to 1933. Walter Gropius founded the institution in Weimar (it was moved to Dessau in 1928) and, from its beginning until closure during the ascent of Nazism, the Bauhaus sought to provide students with a "unified artistic basis" synthesizing technology, craft, art, and theory. Gropius, in the "*First Proclamation of the Weimar Bauhaus*," sought to rescue artists from their isolation "through the conscious, cooperative effort of all craftsmen." There is much of the historic German guilds in the Bauhaus model and the school's characteristic instructional workshop had a team of 2 masters working in close and non-hierarchical collaboration, one a craftsman who focused upon materials, the other an artist. Craft was taught "to train the hand and to ensure technical proficiency," while the more subjective and intellectual realm of art accepted the notion of intuitive creative talent and emphasized theory, "elements of form and their structural laws." As an underlying principle, there was an insistence upon "instruction in the theory of form [being] carried on in close contact with manual training" and a creative foundation based upon the critical, required, six-month Preliminary Course. School policy stated: "Each Bauhaus student is first admitted for a trial period of six months to work in the preliminary course. This course is intended to liberate the student's creative power, to give him an understanding of nature's materials, and to acquaint him with the basic principles which underly all creative activity in the visual arts."5.

The pedagogical, instructive quality of the Bauhaus documents provided me with a model suited to my students' needs. Visual Language was our shared concern. The alphabet became our essential fundamentals, our collective vocabulary and grammar. And at an historic juncture when desktop technology provided students of Art and English glib fingertip impulses adaptable to language study and expression, it seemed at first serendipitous and then utterly commonsensical that knowledge of the alphabet's origins comprise our primary course.

It's a stretch to Klee's **Pedagogoical Sketchbook**, which addresses the dynamics of line, transforming the static dot, through a series of progressions, into rhythmic linear structures occupying space and creating planes. A curiously musical text, it's almost scorelike, filled with energetic, tendon-like drawings that initially appear casually placed upon the page. However, it is orderly and organically schematic, hypnotically repetitious and in motion, poetically metaphoric. And the **Sketchbook** is sublimely crypic, keenly observant, not at all pompous. It captures the Bauhaus classroom descriptions we have of the ambidextrous Paul Klee, lecturing without notes, his back to the students as he faced the blackboard writing energetically with both hands, utterly filling the slate space with lines of text and illustration. As his dot progresses, it "walks" optically about the space of the page.

The four main divisions of the text (and it is a slight book, but 64 pages total) are: the linear dynamics of proportionate line and structure; the "optical adventures" and functional proportions of dimension and balance; the tension and natural direction of the gravitational curve; and kinetic energy demonstrating "inner essence and form-giving cause." Throughout the **Sketchbook's** illustrated pages Klee never abandons his basic dot and line. Sibyl Moholy-Nagy writes in the book's introduction, "Man painted and danced long before he learned to write and construct. The senses of form and tone are his primordial heritage. Paul Klee fused both of these creative impulses into a new entity.6.

In the context of visual language, where the idea of "writing as drawing" is centrally significant and the fact of letters as physical material and occupiers of space is treated as a consideration of each page's composition, it is an exemplary treatise--formally basic and complexly suggestive, elegant and rudimentary, natural and logical while being irascibly intuitive.

Klee's Bauhaus colleague, L. Moholy-Nagy, fills the space of the book's proportions with typographic language both elastic and absolutely clear. Letters and words, lines, dots, and the fundamental proportions of the page are treated as physical materials. The fusion of craft, art and technology that resounds through the philosophy and design achievements of the Bauhaus is achieved in the composition and text of the **Pedagogical Sketchbook**.

-IV-

If one adopts the Bauhaus model of beginning with natural fundamentals and

fully coming to know those materials, how can the study of visual language and its application begin anywhere but with the vestigal record of embryonic pre-alphabetic signs and the invention of writing? The drawn line is a dot in motion, and therein writing's radical origin. The letter is both written language's preliminary and advanced material.

-V-

Why do we write? What is it we seek to teach students through writing instruction? Is it clear self-expression, critical thinking, uniform rules of structure, familiarity with rhetorical exempla? Students and teachers of language and writing, of course, must grapple with these questions, for the written word is civilization's lifeline.

The limitations of memory make writing essential for the accumulation of human knowledge. Education, science, government and law, administration, the codes and contracts of expanding populations, these and many other sustaining civilizing categories quickly come to mind as we consider writing's purposes. But it is essential to realize that writing is an invention, and in the words of David Diringer's classic, **A History of the Alphabet**, "it may not unjustly be ranked as one of the cardinal inventions in the history of mankind."**7.**

Continuing Diringer's introductory discussion: "By whom it was invented, when or for what language, we do not know. Maybe it was invented in different lands, at different times, for different languages. However that may be, there is no doubt that certain forms or systems of writing have given birth to others; certain affinities, which are not always clearly marked, are identifiable. And just as there are relationships between languages, so there are families of scripts; but there is no necessary relationship between families of language and families of scripts.**8.**

The historical, mythic, and prehistoric antecedents which predate phonetic systems are suggestive and illuminating, deeply instructive, and perhaps most importantly, awesome and beautiful in their record. From the study of embryonic letterforms and their transformations, one implicitly learns that writing is unified with archeology and the idea of the fragmentary report, with history, religion, war, cultural and economic domination, with differing measures of time and value.

Students become intimately and securely aware of the care and craft that *the*

word commands, learning that painstaking care and craftsmanship is a given for the writer. Herein lies an alternative to the premium generally placed upon quantitative goals and speed, for in the context of the class an instructor can establish an environment (laboratory, workshop, study group--terms of conspicuous and continuous and searching mastery and discovery and execution of detail, e.g. scientist/laboratory or cabinet maker/workshop) where haste and contemporary urgencies are remote.

What fascinating kinships exist in the geneologies of writing's evolution. What structures, materials, surfaces and substrata. Primitive devices continue to be used--chalks, slates, graphite, pigments, fibers and mats, wood, fingertips and sticks, bones, stones. The mythologies and archetypes resound meaningfully. While the archeological time may initially seem immense, many of the tools and basic materials remain in active use. The evolution of letterforms is purposeful, continual, and though marvelous gaps and mysteries persist, the history is chartable and accessibly eloquent. The cultural anthropology inherent in the formative chapters of writing's development fascinates students and gives play to genuinely startling creativity. It is an inspiring, vivid, ultimately familiar record.

The stages of writing--from iconography (drawings of natural objects), to ideographic (linked pictures), to analytic (systematic conventions--hieroglyphs, pictographs and other important ancient scripts), and finally to the phonetic systems (syllabic signs and alphabetic characters representing primary oral sounds) comprise the graphic story fundamental to usefully understanding the reflexive strokes of written language.

I needn't argue that pictures instruct--we know that. Historically, currently (and here pictoral instruction is pervasive, innumerable, the iconic grid and frame of our computer screens), we trace our perceptions and ideas and the deep record of same, in pictures. Students should examine language's origins in pictures, as it's the radical and primary material of composition and writing.

Whether student or teacher, as one examines these vestigal origins, their fundamental pertinence as visual language is unmistakable. To examine the subject without establishing this original foundation would be a pedagogical omission. Letterforms suggest, especially if one possesses knowledge of their development, echoes of their pictographic embryos. Uncial, italic and other cursive families display their drawn predecessors. Romans stand in geometric balance. The Bauhaus insistence upon a complete and creatively exploratory immersion in the primary materials of one's discipline compels writers to intimately know well language's written beginnings and transitions--to examine, study and tinker with both the materials and intentions that led to

modern writing. The struggle to achieve common symbolic codes allows one to recognize the implicit, civilizing purposes of writing.

It's odd that this history is less than central to the study and teaching of writing. One discovers in the Bauhaus Preliminary Course and comprehensive curriculum design a beneficial insistence upon knowing fundamentals before attempting either practical or artistic manipulation and application. In the diagram illustrating the Bauhaus curriculum's structure, preliminary common fundamentals form the outer ring within which specializations reside and it's interesting to consider the difference between a core, as a hub for spokes of specialization, and the concept of a shared outer rim. Paul Klee's **Pedagogical Sketchbook** provides an intriguing manual which, in certain usages, is an admirable text for instructing students of visual language. By extension, it may be useful instructionally for a broader population of writers.

Electronic technologies are the standard now. The alphabet blinks at us as we compose our pages of print. The matters discussed over these several pages are of fundamental concern for all of us who write.

NOTES

1. Veronique Vienne,"Soup of the Day," in *Metrolpolis: The Magazine of Architecture and Design*, March 1995 (V.14; #7); p. 60.

2. ibid, p. 79.

3. ibid, p. 79.

4. ibid, p. 63.

5. Herbert Bayer, Walter Gropius, Ise Gropius, editors, **Bauhaus 1919-1928** (Museum of Modern Art: NY); 1938. The quoted material, in translation, and accompanied by Johannes Itten's illustrations, is on page 34.

6. Paul Klee, **Pedagogical Sketchbook** (Faber & Faber: London-Boston); 1953. (Translated by Sibyl Moholy-Nagy. The quoted material is from Moholy-Nagy's "Introduction"; p. 7.)

7. David Diringer, **A History of the Alphabet** (Unwin Brothers Limited: Surrey, England); 1977; p. 9.

8. ibid, pgs. 9-10.